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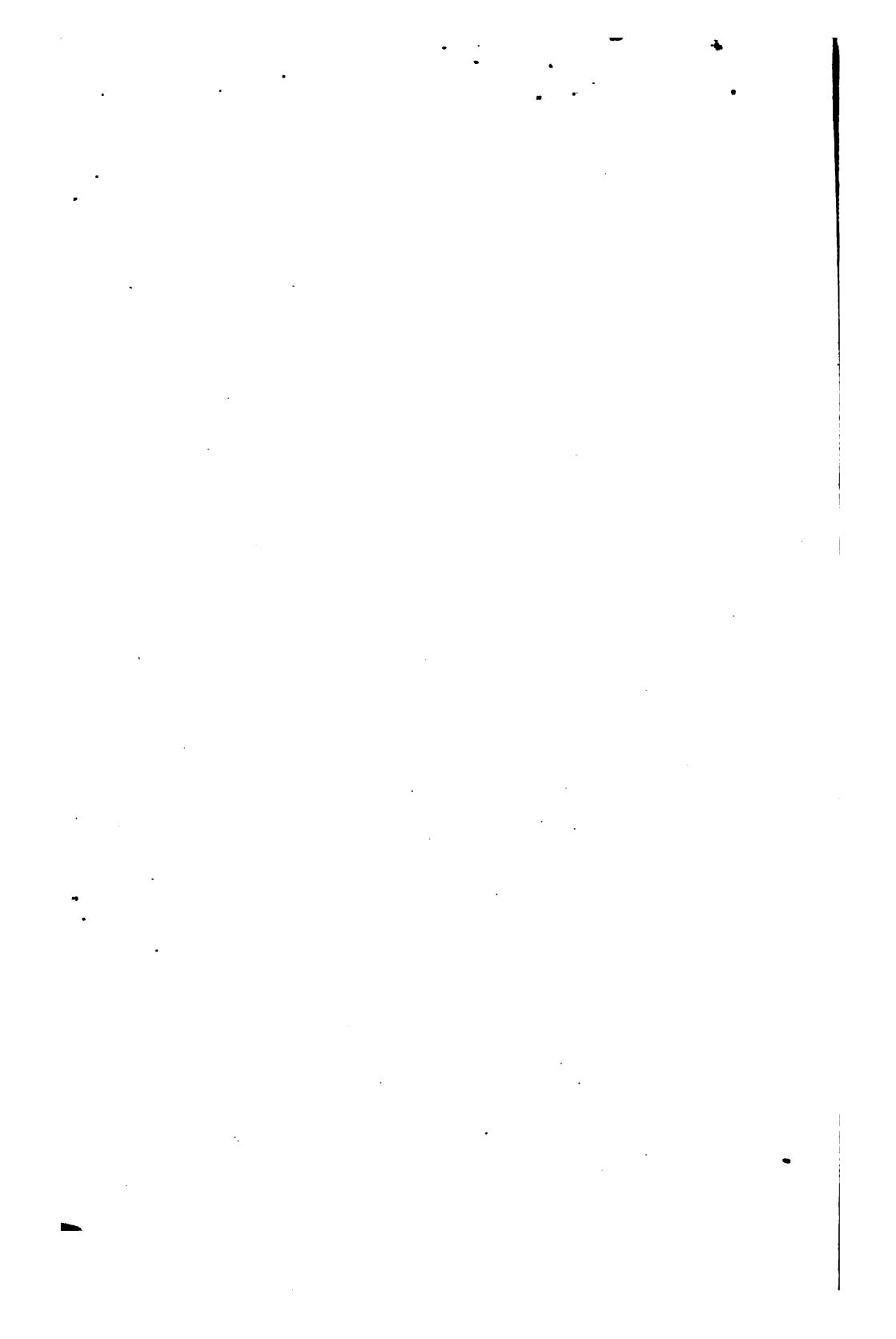
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HOW

## The Browning Society came into being.

WITH SOME WORDS ON THE  
CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTRASTS  
OF BROWNING'S EARLY AND LATE WORK.

BY F. J. FURNIVALL.

(Reprinted from the Browning Society's "Abstract" of his speeches at the  
Inaugural Meeting of the Society, Oct. 28, 1881.)

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# BROWNING SOCIETY.

## MONTHLY ABSTRACT OF PROCEEDINGS.

*Inaugural Meeting, October 28, 1881.*

MR. FURNIVALL said: "Fellow-Members of the Browning Society, and Ladies and Gentlemen of the Public, it has been thought well that I, as the original suggester of this Society, and joint-Founder of it with Miss Hickey, should take the Chair at this our Inaugural Meeting—at which I am glad to see fully 300 of you present—in order that I may say how the Society came to be. Of course some low-minded folk have attributed unworthy motives to me in relation to it. 'Tis their nature to. I pass them by. But some of you know that I, having been for 30 years Honorary Secretary of the Philological Society, have also founded the Early English Text Society—its Original Series in 1864, its Extra Series in 1868,—the Chaucer Society (in 1868), the Ballad Society (in 1868), and the New Shakspere Society (in 1873). Thus covering our Literature from its start, say in the 7th century, to its great mid career in the 16th and 17th, it was only natural that I should wish to come down to our own time. And as all my other Societies had been founded on behalf of poets not sufficiently studied, or who had not had their due meed of honour from their generation, or—as in the case of Shakspere—were not being studied in the right way, I became more or less conscious that if I ever started a Society for the study of a living poet, that Society would be a Browning one. But even after Browning did us the honour to accept the Presidency of the New Shakspere Society, pressure of work obliged me to put-by the thought of a fresh Society, till one day Miss Hickey told me how she admired Browning, and was in some points toucht even more deeply by him than by Shakspere. I thought she ought to know the poet. And when she came to call on him with me one Sunday morning (July 3, 1881), I said to her, 'What do you think of a Browning Society? Would you help in one?' She answerd that she had sent me a letter—which never reacht me—suggesting the Society, and that she'd certainly help. In our walk over to Warwick Crescent, I made up my mind that the Society should be formd. But Miss Hickey said, 'Suppose Mr. Browning should disapprove of it, what would you do?' 'Go on all the same, and not mind him. We want the Society for ourselves, not only for him. But you can't suppose him such an unreasonable being as to object to folk who honour him meeting together to give him the real study that his works want, and have never yet had.' Still, as Miss Hickey refuzed to be Hon. Sec. unless Browning knew the Society was to be formd, and did not raize objections to it, I had to mention the fact to him in Miss Hickey's presence; and when he at once laugh good-humouredly and talkt about something else, our excellent Hon. Sec. had clearly freed her soul and could set to work, as she did, splendidly. Then she and I both got some Members. I wrote the Society's Prospectus, put Mr. Kirkman—the only real Browning scholar I then knew—down for the Inaugural Address, and told him he *must* give it, then got a Committee together, and set to work at the *Browning Bibliography* which has been for 2 or 3 days in all our Members' hands, and which would have been more complete if, after my first 3 weeks' work

at it in the Museum, I hadn't been carried off for an 8-weeks' holiday, to pretty Castell above Snowdon or Gwynant valley in North Wales.

"This, then, is how our Society came about. We are over 70 Members now. That means 100 before the end of this year; and I hope 150 by next July. Our success has been greater than I expected, seeing how many objections have been made to us. One of the most general is, that no Society should be founded to study and illustrate the works of a living poet. As a ducal correspondent of mine put it, 'My dear Mr. Furnivall, I think it is 300 years too early for a Browning Society.' To all such folk, I can only say: 'You've never founded a Chaucer or Shakspere Society, and had to worry and bother over this word and that, this allusion and the other; the man Shakspere's Sonnets were written to, the lady of Chaucer's early love, and all the thousand and one puzzles these poets' works present. If you had, you'd never have thought it superfluous, for a set of the contemporaries of each poet to have cleared up all your bothers for you. You'd have blest them every day of your life.' That posterity will thank us for our work at Browning is certain. But he speaks the Spirit of his Time, and he speaks to his Time; his message is first to us; we are the folk most bound to understand him; and it is for my generation and myself that I want the Society in being. I want help to understand Browning myself; you all want help to understand him for yourselves; your presence here to-night shows that you do. Our well-wishers at Cambridge and Oxford, in the United States, in France, Italy, India and the Colonies, want the same help. Well, without the Society we can't get it: but mutual study will give it us. The Society will bring together those good folk and true who have for years worked at our poet, and will enable Mr. Kirkman, for instance, to tell all of us, what he told his Hampstead-audiences 15 years ago; Mr. Sharpe, from his quiet country rectory, what results he has reached in his ponderings over Browning's last volume; Mr. Nettleship, from his studio, how the author of *Andrea del Sarto* has affected him; Mr. James Thomson, a poet of high mark himself, what he has noted in the genius of his master in the craft; Miss Lewis, what a woman worthy of the scholar's and statesman's name she bears, sees in Browning to admire and to like; Prof. Corson, from his University, why he of the New World brings his tribute of praise to our poet of the Old. I say, that this bringing into a focus, of lights from various sources on Browning's thoughts and works, *must* make them clearer to us, and through us to our own and after times. No doubt we shall have flippant article-writers' affecting omniscience, and suggesting that there's no need for a Browning Society, because they know all about the poet—and everybody and everything else.—But old birds are not to be caught with chaff. Some of us have had to sift these all-knowing ready writers pretty often, and it is odd how little grain has come through the sieve. Our "loyalty o' the scholar,—stung by taunt of fools," (*Fifine*, p. 62) will bear it.

"It is Mr. Kirkman's wish that I should not now try to justify the existence of the Society on the ground of Browning's merits as a poet, thinker, and teacher: our Lecturer does not wish to be forestaled on this point. But to avoid appearing under false pretences, one thing I desire to state: and that is, that I do not affect to share Browning's religious views. Among our poets and men of the first rank in England, his 'note' in this regard is, his intense belief in a personal God—God in one person, *not* in three,—and in the immortality of the soul. The first I take as a hypothesis, the second as an imagination; but though these beliefs underlie his whole work, I do heartily desire the spread of the study and the influence of Robert Browning; for, having lived some years with Chaucer and Shakspere, to try and know what a Man is, and what a Poet is, I declare my

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Saturday Review' as a matter of course. But any one who has known a *Saturday* small-type man anxiously hunting about for a subject, will feel no ill-will at a poor fellow making his £3 15s.—if that is still the pay—out of the Society, whatever he says against it. Fault-finding is his trade.

conviction that Browning is the manliest, the strongest, the life-fullest, the deepest, and thoughtfullest living poet, the one most needing earnest study, and the one most worthy of it. I call on Mr. Kirkman to deliver his Address."—At its close,

Mr. Furnivall, after asking the audience for a warm vote of thanks—which was enthusiastically given—to Mr. Kirkman for his humourous and admirable Address, said that he *must* take exception to Mr. K.'s division of Browning's works into : 1. those which might be understood and enjoyd (the early works) ; 2. those which never would be (the later ones). This division really meant, 1. the poems which Mr. K. liked ; 2. those which he didn't like. Of the specimens named of the latter class, it was obvious, that *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* could be easily understood by any intelligent youth : the story was told almost as fluently as Longfellow would tell it. In *Paochiarotto* the inner meaning of the first poem only was hard ; as soon as you knew that *Numpholeptos* meant 'rapt or entrant by a nymph,' all difficulty in the rest of the volume was at an end. *Hohenstiel-Schrangau* to be clear, needed only Mrs. Orr's explanation of the allegory of the two Blots and the line between them—that they were the upper and lower antagonistic strata of French Society, whom Louis Napoleon had to connect and yet keep from falling foul of one another ;—that up to p. 84 the ex-Emperor was explaining how his honest care for the poor—which many bitter haters of his admit—kept him from trying constitutional and other experiments ; and that then, on and after p. 84, feeling that no real defence can be made for L. N., the poet invents a lying Historian, Thiers-Hugo, into whose mouth he puts the lying imperial version of the Italian and other inexcusable businesses, while he makes L. N., as Sagacity, comment on the lies. To Mr. Kirkman, who understands *Sordello* and *Fifine*, there can be no difficulty in these simpler poems. But, he doesn't like them : therefore they "never will be understood and enjoyed."

"It is too late to-night (said Mr. F.) to discuss whether all poems are meant to be enjoyd, any more than all life. Who enjoys 'Othello' when he first reads it? I recollect still the intense pain it gave me : 'But yet, the pity of it! O Iago! the pity of it, Iago!' Not much enjoyment in that, for any human soul. My favourite verse in Browning comes-in here :

'Then welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids, nor sit nor stand, but go!  
*Be our joys three parts pain!*  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain!  
Learn, nor account the pang! Dare, never grudge the throe.'

Depend on it, *Hohenstiel* and the other Fourth-Period books have their message for us, tho' we mayn't be able to enjoy them.

"Mr. Kirkman will hardly let *The Ring and the Book* into Browning's likeable time. Yet assuredly it is his greatest work. Granted that you don't like the subject, that you'd rather, with me, have had the trial of Christ, with Karshish as one of its witnesses or reporters, yet you can't deny that as a creation, a unity, the *Ring and Book* stands above any and every other work of Browning's. Like it or not, as you please, you can't get away from the fact of its greatness. No need to go into details to prove to you what you all know ; but as a specimen of the evidence, let me quote you one line which bears a witness to Browning's penetrative imagination that no earlier poem affords. After 5000 lines of excuses and attempts to throw blame on his murdered wife, Guido Franceschini, in his agony, after appealing to all in earth and heaven who he thought would help him, is made to call on the one ideal of purity and innocence he has known, his slandered victim—

'Abate, Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God!—  
POMPILIA! will you let them murder me?'

That can stand by Macduff's "He has no children" in Shakspere; it can stand by Browning's Fourth-Period

'And the beaten in speed ! sobb'd Hoseyn; You never have lov'd my Pearl !' but no First or Second Period line, enjoyable as it may be, can be compar'd with it, none that goes to the very heart of the matter like those above do.

"Take another instance; the finest image in that First-Period drama which is enjoyed most by most Browning readers, the thunderstorm in *Pippa passes*. Set beside it the Third-Period thunderstorm in *The Ring and the Book*; and if you can't see at once—independently of your enjoyment—how much grander the later one is than the first, superb as that is, you have much to learn in poetry.

*Ottima*, 1842.

Buried in woods we lay, you recollect ;  
Swift ran the searching tempest over-  
head,  
And ever and anon some bright white  
shaft  
Burnt thro' the pine-tree roof, here  
burnt, and there  
*As if God's messenger, thro' the close  
wood screen,*  
*Plunged and re-plunged his weapon at  
a centure,*  
Feeling for guilty thee and me ; then  
broke  
The thunder like a whole sea overhead.

*The Pope*, 1868-9.

I stood at Naples once, a night so dark  
I could have scarce conjectured there  
was earth  
Anywhere, sky or sea, or world at all ;  
*But the night's black was burst thro'  
by a blaze,*  
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth  
groan'd and bore  
Thro' her whole length of mountains  
visible ;  
*There lay the city, thick and plain  
with spires,*  
*And, like a ghost dis-shrouded, white  
the sea.*  
So may the truth be flasht out by one  
blow,  
And Guido see one instant, and be  
saved.

"Try again a subject common to the Second and Fourth Periods, the appeal of a man to the woman he vainly loves, to give him, by her love, the power to be his true self, to rise to his full height. Some of you will be shockt, perhaps, when I compare a poem dear to every reader of Browning, *Andrea del Sarto* and its tender pathetic pleading of the faultless painter, with the *Inn Album* and its base seducer and gamester, who wreckt the life of the girl who loved him as a God. But read the passionate heart-wrung appeal of the strong sinner to her he has so foully wrongd, to give him once again the love that can be alone his life:—

'Quicken me ! call me yours !—  
Yours and the world's—yours and the world's and God's ! . . .  
Lift me from out perdition's deep of deeps  
To light and life and love !—'

and acknowledge with me that those four pages of the *Inn Album* (135-8) are to the *Andrea* as tropic noon to northern twilight, that they rise from a depth, and reach a height, that the earlier poem neither penetrates to nor attains.<sup>1</sup>

"But Mr. Kirkman is unquestionably right in noting a change in Browning's later poems. 1. The subjects of sum of them have no doubt becum less pleasing, less interesting to most folk :—Louis Napoleon, the dancing-girl *Fifine*, the gamblers and reprobates of the *Inn Album*, the loose livers (tho' penitents) of *Red-Cotton*; few can care for them, or can take the clinical view of them, and so will not work at them till their power and deep meaning become plain. 2. The manner of handling has also becum less taking to the general reader.

<sup>1</sup> Compare too "the burst of landscape surging in, Sunrise and all," on p. 4, with any earlier landscape you like, 'Oh to be in England', 'Morning', 'Flight of the Duchess', &c.

As a sample of the change—not quite a fair one I admit,—set the coming of Spring from *Paracelsus* beside that from *Fifine*.

*Paracelsus*, V. 666—682 :—

‘earth is a wintry clod :  
But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passes  
Over its breast to waken it, rare verdure 668  
Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between  
The wither'd tree-roots and the cracks of frost,  
Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face;  
The grass grows bright, the boughs are swoln with blooms 672  
Like chrysalids impatient for the air,  
The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run  
Along the furrows, ants make their ado ;  
Above, birds fly in merry flocks, the lark  
Soars up and up, shivering for joy; 676  
Afar the ocean sleeps; white fishing gulls  
Flit where the strand is purple with its tribe  
Of nested limpets; savage creatures seek  
Their loves in wood and plain—and God renews  
His ancient rapture !’

*Fifine*, p. 153 :—

‘Hence, when the earth began its life afresh in May.  
And fruit-trees bloomed, and waves would wanton, and the bay  
Ruffle its wealth of weed, and stranger-birds arrive,  
And beasts take each a mate. . .’

“Most folk regret the sparseness of the Fancy and Flow in the late poems as compar'd with the early ones. They want more ‘nice bits’ like this in *Paracelsus*, I. 347-353 :—

‘Ask the gier eagle why she stoops at once  
Into the vast and unexplored abyss;  
What full-grown power informs her from the first;  
Why she not marvels, strenuously beating  
The silent boundless regions of the sky ?  
Be sure, they sleep not whom God needs !’

like the sundown in *Sordello*, like the lines on Palma’s golden locks?

But Browning has evidently made up his mind that we shall eat our mutton without currant jelly, our hard biscuits without Narbonne honey. He has not

“That autumn eve was stilled : 80  
A last remains of sunset dimly burned  
O'er the far forests,—like a torch-flame turned  
By the wind back upon its bearer's hand  
In one long flare of crimson ;—as a brand,  
The woods beneath lay black.” Book I. p. 255, ed. 1863.

“. . . conspicuous in his world 947  
Of dreams sat Palma. How the tresses curled  
Into a sumptuous swell of gold, and wound  
About her like a glory ! even the ground 950  
Was bright as with spilt sunbeams.” . . . (*Sord.* Bk. I. p. 285.)  
(Bk. II. p. 291, ed. 1863.) “There sat Adelaide,  
Silent ; but at her knees the very maid  
Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,  
The same pure fleecy hair ; one woft of which, 100  
Golden and great, quite toucht his cheek as o'er  
She leant, speaking some six words and no more.”

deign'd in his later works to use the slighter tools of Fancy and the like, of which he showed himself a master in his earlier ones. With intense earnestness he has gone straight to his facts, his reasonings, his dealings with men's souls, the meaning of evil, the being of God, and has refused to dally with triflings on the road. He has also taken up some more repulsively diseased cases of corrupted souls than he did in earlier life. But they are only such as he finds here on earth, with which the God he believes-in deals; and he thinks that the Poet whose business is to strive to see things as God sees them, may lawfully set these crimes before his fellow-men, not for their *enjoyment*, but for their spirits' gain<sup>1</sup>. If his clerical readers complain of the change, let the lay ones be at least content with it, even if they don't praise it. What they lose in Fancy and Beauty, they gain in Subtlety, Power, Penetration, and Depth.

"I can detain you no longer to-night to discuss Browning's characteristics, but will only again thank Mr. Kirkman for the glowing words in which he has, from his heart, express his admiration of, his debt to, Robert Browning; words which we all echoed from our hearts, and which we mean to make good in our work for the poet we honour, and the Society we now inaugurate."

Mr. Leonard Lewis said, "many people might remember that Beethoven had been spoken of as 'no musician.' It took time to be understood. He himself was a painter, not a poet. He considered that that poetry which could be understood without thought was not the highest nor the greatest. 'Lose and find.'"

Mr. Moncure Conway said he was an old Browningite, and perhaps hardly in keeping with the new school and new ideas. He must congratulate the Society on having inaugurated something better than paying homage to dust that had been unrecognized when alive. If there had been a Shakspere Society in Shakspere's time, how we should have treasured its records. Robert Browning has been creating poems all through the world; through him many Spirits had been kindled, and he had met many hearts at their greatest crisis.

"Thirty years ago a few students of Harvard gathered together to study his dramas, not expecting any gain to religion, but they found that he had got hold of true religion, the realities of life. In his heroic men and beautiful deep-souled women the poet shows the grand religion of human nature.

"Browning's great gift lies in his purely dramatic force. Mr. Conway remembered when *Colombe's Birthday* was performed at Boston, one of the audience, having only *read* the play, said it was incomprehensible; but after having seen it, it became simple to him. It was written to be *acted*, not only *read*.

"W. H. Channing had said to Mr. Conway, that 'the only thing *Sordello* needed was punctuation; he then punctuated it, making it clear—for *Sordello*.' Afterwards, Browning himself punctuated it in the same way."

Mr. Conway also spoke of Browning's power of touching people, and told an anecdote of his *Lost Leader* and *Good News from Ghent* being recited to a chance lot of rough fellows on the prairies, over their evening fire, and bringing tears to every eye.

<sup>1</sup> I see a kind of analogy in Holman Hunt's treatment of the Flight into Egypt. An artist of the school of Lucca Giordano sends with the Holy Family two flying groups of little angels, five of them with whole bodies, five with only heads and wings. (Luigi Bardi's *Galleria Pitti*, Firenze, 1842, vol. 4, near the middle.) Paris Bordone puts his little angels in a tree, and makes them pick acorns (or some fruits?), and put them into Joseph's hand for his wife and child, under the tree (*ib.* vol. 3, near the beginning). Van Dyck gives his cherubs drums, and makes them play a tune to refresh the travellers' spirits while they halt (*ib.* vol. 2, near the end). Holman Hunt, instead of angels, has (I am told) the murdered Innocents showing their fellow-babe their wounds, got thro' him. Who doubts which is the most penetrative and imaginative treatment? The most Browning-like? One is content to set 'enjoyment' aside.

